II

Vietnam Options

12-22-68

[redacted] Ellsberg

OUTLINE OF OPTIONS

(Status of Outline as per H.R./F.C.I. Saturday PM; Ellsberg/Halperin in the meantime will have elaborated and revised it)

The subheadings denote distinct policy options, some are mutually exclusive, others are not. The first three options correspond to an evaluation of the present situation and prospects which concludes that VC and DRV are weak and war-weary, RVNAF and GVN are improving, pacification is successful, etc. They all aim at an outcome close to victory, either with a negotiated ending or a VC/NVA "fade-out". They imply acceptance of continued high U.S. combat involvement for at least 12-18 months. For the Paris negotiations, these options imply marking time, rejecting a cease-fire or mutual withdrawal (except on terms giving GVN full control over South Vietnam).

1. Continue present course in South Vietnam.

   1A. Limited reduction in U.S. forces (50-100,000), described as "removing fat," not combat strength. Possibility of a leaner budget and casualty-reducing tactics.

2. Escalate effort; or threaten to do so if NVA returns, invades, or attacks, or if DRV refuses to meet our terms in negotiations.

   2A. Resume bombing: to 19°, to former levels, or higher intensity. Add blockade of Haiphong and other North Vietnamese ports.

   2B. Increase U.S. troops; resume heavy pressure on main force/NVA in bases and border areas.

   2C. Cross-border operations into Cambodia, Laos, DMZ, NVN. Vinh landing. Land operations from coast to Thailand to cut trail.

   2D. Strong (unprecedented) pressure on GVN/RVNAF to "improve," including moves toward joint command and greater U.S. influence and responsibility in civil matters. Give Montagnards and other minorities weapons and more autonomy.

3. "Radical Counterinsurgency" Strategy, emphasizing small-unit, night time counter-guerrilla organization and tactics, police/intelligence efforts, population protection and control, political action. U.S. Commander-in-Chief for Allied war effort (?).

The next three options correspond to an evaluation of the current situation and the prospects for future U.S. military efforts which conclude that victory could not be achieved within 2 to 3 years. They aim at a compromise outcome, better or worse, with a great reduction in the U.S. burden within 1-3 years.

4. Mutual Withdrawal (various patterns) of NVA and U.S. forces, and/or ceasefire.

   4A. Tacit, rather than negotiated.

   4B. GVN (indirectly) encouraged to broaden its base and to deal with the NLF.

   4C. Deescalation (e.g., local withdrawals or ceasefires, tacit ceasefires, failure to challenge opponent in certain areas, "quarantine" of the Delta.).

   4D. NVA withdrawal from Laos and Cambodia.

   4E. No ceasefire between GVN and VC during U.S.-NVA withdrawal, but U.S.-NVA ceasefire.

5. Slow unilateral withdrawal (2-3 years, with GVN agreement if possible).

   5A. With deescalation or (tacit) cease-fire between U.S. and NVA/VC.

   5B. Moving into large enclaves and strengthening their defenses.

6. Quick and complete withdrawal (6-12 months).

7. Negotiate political settlement in Paris, e.g. coalition imposed on GVN with arrangements for elections, internal political safeguards, and/or international guarantees. International supervisory forces?

II. Add. 2

THE POSSIBILITY OF A SHRINKING OF
OPTIONS BEFORE JANUARY 21

One must keep in mind that the available options for future U.S. policy on Vietnam -- particularly for early steps -- might soon be further reduced.

For example:

(1) President Johnson might decide to announce the withdrawal of 50,000 men, to be initiated (or even completed) during the first part of January. This could be presented as an expression of U.S. "good faith" in negotiating mutual withdrawal and/or as being warranted by Allied success.

(2) Through a convergence of actual and fabricated good news, the mood might spread in the United States that victory (moderated through negotiations) is around the corner. The following might occur: (1) the successful completion of the lunar flight -- unrelated as it is to Vietnam -- provides a backdrop against which favorable evaluations and confidence in success thrive more easily than their opposite; (2) the withdrawal of 50,000 men with the explanation that they are no longer needed; (3) some successes (or at least no dramatic failures) in the field; (4) a stream of optimistic news from Saigon; (5) a generous GVN stance in Paris ("we'll talk to anybody because we're winning").

Assume that the NVA-VC tried to counteract this mood through offensives, but were delayed till February. Such February offensives could be viewed as a violation of the

understanding on the bombing halt and a last-ditch effort. The pressures for re-escalation -- or at least no further reductions -- could thus be strengthened.

Or conversely:

(3) A VC-NVA offensive during January might have a dramatic impact that would make it harder to defend the view that the other side has been substantially weakened and that U.S.-ARVN strength has grown.

Dramatic ARVN defections, e.g. whole divisions, (unlikely now) would have some effect.

II - Add. 4

DANGER OF EMPHASIS ON LAOS

USG evaluations have apparently converged on the notion that after a U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, Laos would be of key importance for Southeast Asia. In particular, the "domino" effect is said to hinge largely on the fate of Laos. Hence, it is argued that for an agreed mutual withdrawal from Vietnam, the United States should insist on an agreement for Laos that would lead to a reduction of, or at least prohibit an increase in NVA forces.

Three questions should be raised regarding this emphasis on Laos:

(1) Is confidence in this evaluation warranted? How likely is it that other "dominos" would fall if non-Communist Laos were taken over by the Pathet Lao with NVA help? Specifically, how would the defenses of Thailand be affected?

(2) What are the likely costs if, in negotiations for mutual withdrawal, the United States insists that NVA should agree to keep out of Laos (or not to penetrate more)? Assuming we succeed in obtaining such a DRV agreement, will we have to give in on some other points in the overall withdrawal agreement? Or to put it differently, how much in terms of diplomatic concessions is such an agreement worth? Specifically, if the DRV refuses the Laos deal, should the United States switch to Option 1 or 2?

(3) After mutual U.S.-NVA withdrawal from Vietnam is completed, what can we do to deter a violation of such a Laos agreement? Might U.S. reaction to (or preparations for) a violation of the new Laos agreement result in new U.S. commitments to defend Laos?

SUGGESTED CONTENTS OF PACKAGE

(Status Monday AM)

Ellsberg

I. Summary of Present Situation (2 pages) (Jenkins, Cooper?)

II. Options Paper (about 10 pages?) (Ellsberg/Halperin)

Addenda (or to be inserted in Options Paper)

✓ 1. Cost Figures (Who? Pauker memo as input ready)

✗ 2. (Omit?) Possible shrinking of options before January 21 (Iklé draft ready)

✓ 3. Problems of Partial Withdrawal (Iklé drafting; Monday others?)

Loss of Province Capitals (Pauker drafting)

✓ 4. The Laos Question

The Danger of Emphasis on Laos (Iklé draft ready)

Options for Laos (Paul Langer draft ready Monday AM)

✓ III. The Calendar of Decisions (Rowen?, Iklé first draft ready)

IV. Attachments

Negotiating Problems

The Politics of Saigon (Pauker drafting)

Negotiating Positions (Gelb's paper)

The Interdiction Problem (Rowen drafting) ← ?

Cease-fire Problems (ready from ISA?)

Others?

Wait until meeting with HK

540,500

Cost saving

Take out ~~50~~ 100 K throughout calendar 69
" " 200 K " " "

Level annual cost at 350 K in country
200 K
100 K.
} + MAP + AID

Issues and Actions

A. The basic issues requiring judgment are:

1. Is the maintenance in power of the current GVN of sufficient importance to the U.S. that we should be prepared to continue our ~~current rate of~~ effort at current rate for the next 5 years? Or an escalated rate for 2-3 years?

2. If not, can we and should we seek to involve ourselves through negotiations in the creation of an alternate or coalition government? How?

3. If we wish seek to avoid imposing or negotiating such a coalition government, could we make other arrangements with Hanoi that would not bring about the collapse of the present GVN, but would permit a mutual withdrawal of forces?

4. ~~Given the success of our current military strategies,~~ effects Do we need to maintain current force levels (549,500 men in Vietnam) to continue present effectiveness, or can we maintain comparable fighting capability at a lower troop level? What level?

5. Should we in any case firmly commit ourselves, accepting the attendant risks, to a continuing withdrawal of U.S. forces over the next several years in order to both reduce our own costs and to prod Saigon, and inevitably into negotiating with the NLF while taking the necessary steps to increase its own political and military effectiveness?

B. ~~Three~~ Five specific issues require decisions in the short run:

1. Negotiations
   1. Negotiate only mutual withdrawal with Hanoi leaving political issues to Saigon.
   2. Involve ourselves in negotiations of a compromise political settlement putting necessary pressure on Saigon.
   3. Hold firm to demand that Hanoi withdraw all communist forces in return for right of former VC to participate peacefully in a SVN ruled by current GVN.

2. US Troop Levels
   1. Decide now to withdraw 50,000 or more troops over next year.
   2. Withdraw no troops pending effort to negotiate withdrawal.

3. Relations with GVN
   1. Support current GVN putting stability and/or good relations over reform.
   2. Press the GVN for needed reforms ~~and~~ negotiations with NLF, if necessary by threatening to withhold ~~and/~~ or withdraw troops, and by ~~correct~~ covert influence.
   3. Provoke conflict with GVN in an effort to bring neutralist government to power which will press for ceasefire and an accommodation with the NLF.

4. Full and frank Presidential position on VN situation and intended course of action.
   1. Delivery as soon as possible.
   2. Await 3-6 month policy review.
   3. Avoid.

5. Investigation and Policy Discussion
   1. Exploit opportunities prior to 20 January for observation of VN situation and operations by ~~twisted~~ trusted, experienced, disinterested reporters, on informal, discreet basis.
   2. Prepare options and discussion paper, on basis of this one, for sending to agencies for comment followed by NSC discussion.

TOP SECRET → (over)

6. Non-Military Efforts in Vietnam.

6. Should current US/GVN activities in Vietnam continue to be pressed, such as "Accelerated Pacification", "Phoenix" etc? Should they be pressed if Gradual withdrawal is selected as course of action?

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B. Three specific issues require decisions in the short run:

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ALTERNATIVES

I. Military Escalation aimed at victory.
Expanded military operations, including ground forces, into Cambodia and Laos and perhaps increased troop levels and resumption of bombing, aimed at obtaining withdrawal of all NVA/VC forces in 1-2 years, leaving current GVN in power.

II. Current Military Posture aimed at victory.
Continue current force levels and pressures, aimed at withdrawal or destruction of all NVA/VC forces and apparatus in acceptable time-frame (1-2 years; but perhaps longer), leaving current GVN in power.

III. Radical Counter-Insurgency strategy aimed at victory.
Radical restructuring of U.S. forces into small units in joing command with ARVN, and radical reforms of GVN and RVNAF, aimed at neutralizing NVA and VC Main Forces and destroying VC local forces, guerrillas, and apparatus completely in 3-5 years.

IV. Negotiated Political Compromise.
Seek to negotiate in Paris a compromise overall political settlement in the South leading to U.S. and NVN withdrawal, continuing present military activities (perhaps withdrawing 50,000 men).

V. Negotiated Mutual Withdrawal.
Seek only to negotiate mutual withdrawal with Hanoi (rather than involving the U.S. directly in negotiations for an internal political settlement), withdrawing and deescalating in accord with negotiations and actual situation in the field, but meanwhile maintaining military activities of current type.

VI. Substantial Reduction of U.S. Presence while seeking negotiated solution.
Withdraw all but 150,000 troops over next 2 years, while seeking to negotiate mutual withdrawal or political compromise, but making it possible to stay at a lower cost over the long haul.

VII. Withdrawal of all U.S. forces in 2-3 years.
Firm public commitment to withdraw all U.S. forces from South Vietnam in 2-3 years, and meanwhile to deescalate U.S. operations in the South, whether or not a settlement is reached.

VIII. Withdrawal of all U.S. forces within 12 months.
Firm public commitment and actions to withdrawal of all U.S. forces from South Vietnam within 12 months whether or not a settlement is reached.